DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 134 EA 005 145

AUTHOR Mason, Ward S.; Gross, Neal
TITLE Role Conceptualization and Empirical Complexities.
PUB DATE 53
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at American Sociological Society Annual Meeting (Berkeley, California, August 30-September 1, 1953)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; *Behavior Patterns; Board of Education Role; *Occupations; Performance; Research Problems; *Role Conflict; Role Models; Role Perception; *Role Theory; Socialization; Speeches; *Superintendent Role

ABSTRACT

Certain problems arose in an attempt to develop a research design for studying the social role of the school executive. The study was to examine the degree of consensus on behavioral expectations for the occupants of this occupational role, the degree of potential or actual role conflict in this social position, and the manner in which an occupational role is defined and "learned." Most existent conceptual role models need to be reformulated to give them a greater empirical utility. It becomes necessary to develop conceptual frameworks and analytic categories to handle data that reveal different numbers and kinds of relevant alters in respect to different sectors of ego and alter behavior as incumbents of social positions. This suggests that what is usually viewed as a single role may require subdivision into a number of sub-roles for the explanation of the incumbent's behavior. The common practice of assuming that a particular status or position has associated with it a set of rights and duties on which there is consensus should, therefore, be abandoned. (Authors/WM)

JUN 1 1973

ED 077124

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ROLE CONCEPTUALIZATION AND EMPIRICAL COMPLEXITIES

by

Ward S. Mason
and
Neal Gross
Harvard University

Paper read at the 1953 meeting of the American Sociological Society, Berkeley, California, August 30 - September 1, 1953.

EA 005 145

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

Role Conceptualization and Empirical Complexities

by
Neal Gross and Ward S. Mason
Harvard University

The concept role has wide usage in the literature of the behavioral sciences. It has been referred to as the central concept of both sociology and social psychology.[1] It is frequently a pivotal term in the description and analysis of: (1) the socialization process and personality development, (2) the structure and functioning of total societies and (3) the structure and functioning of sub systems within a total society such as the family, association, religious and business organization.[2] It has also been viewed as a relevant concept for the study of the etiology of pathological behavior.[3]

As part of our inquiry concerning the social role of the school executive, we were interested in the following questions: (1) To what extent is there consensus on the behavioral expectations for the occupants of this occupational role (a) among incumbents of this social position (superintendents) and (b) among the incumbents of an always existent counter position (school board member) and (c) between these two social positions? (2) To what extent does occupancy of this social position result in potential or actual role conflict for the role incumbent? (3) How is an occupational role defined and "learned?"

We desired to develop a research design that met the criteria of (1) relevance to the development of role behavioral theories and (2) operational utility for the empirical inquiry. In our attempt to meet these criteria and as a consequence of our inspection of data, we noted

a number of empirical complexities that most existent conceptual role schemes have not taken into account. This suggests the need for a theoretical reformulation of at least certain phases of existing role models or the development of new paradigms with greater empirical utility.

It is impossible within our time limitations to present a detailed critique of existent role paradigms or the role conceptualization and analytical categories we are using in our inquiry. We will, therefore, only present certain of the important empirical complexities that cannot be handled by existing role formulations and suggest certain of their implications for the work of other students of this problem area.

Empirical Complexities Not Amenable to Handling Under Existing Theoretic Formulations

Most sociological and social psychological role formulations[4] are concerned with the social system level of analysis. Society is conceived to be organized into a series of positions or statuses. Associated with each position is a set of institutionalized expectations regarding the rights and duties of ego, the position incumbent, and alter, the occupant of a complementary position. Most attention has been given to dyadic relationships (e.g., husband - wife). However, in empirical investigations each of the elements of this model becomes problematic. Consequently, in our study of the role of the school executive, we are finding the following ranges of complexity which must be handled theoretically and operationally: First, we are finding that the expectations

regarding the rights and duties of the incumbent of the superintendency role must be analyzed in relation to multiple alters in the same counter role (e.g., three to nine school board members) and in terms of its relations to multiple counter roles (e.g., the teacher, school board member, parent). A second complexity occurs since our data reveal that there may be consensus on a behavioral expectation among one or more categories of alters (e.g., Board of Aldermen). Third, there may be agreement on the role incumbent's expected behavior among some alters in different counter roles and disagreement among the remaining alters.

Fourth, we are finding that there may be a high degree of consensus among relevant alters and the role incumbent in certain areas of ego's expected performance (for example, his duties) and little or no consensus in other areas (for example, his rights). Fifth, there also appears to be a high degree of consensus on the functions or purposes of the social position studied by less consensus on the priority norms among them or on the appropriate means for accomplishing agreed-upon purposes. Sixth, there may be a great deal of consensus between ego and alter or alters in terms of the reciprocal rights and duties tied to other counter roles. Seventh, each counter role may be relevant to only certain "sectors" of ego's role. The "sector of relevance" may or may not coincide for the various counter roles. Eighth, role formulations are usually structured around a set of expectations regarding reciprocal rights and duties of ego and alter to each other. We find numerous expectations regarding duties of a role incumbent to third parties. Thus, many school board members feel that they have a right to expect the

superintendent to behave in certain fairly well defined ways toward teachers, students, janitors, parents and so on. In short, conceptual formulations need to be revised or expanded to take into account non-recipient alters as well as recipient alters in regard to ego's obligations. Ninth, there may be consensus between ego and alters that certain behaviors are desirable or undesirable but there may or may not be consensus on whether this behavior is mandatory or preferred or prohibited or simply not preferred.

In short, whereas most "role" theoretic formulations consider only the rights and duties of a dyadic relationship in a holistic manner, we are finding that it is necessary to develop a conceptual framework and analytic categories to handle data which reveal that there are different numbers and kinds of relevant alters in respect to different sectors of ego's and alter's behavior as incumbents of social positions. This suggests that what is usually viewed as a single role may require subdivision into a number of sub-roles for the explanation of the incumbents behavior. Preliminary inspection of our data suggests that for the superintendency position some sectors and some sub-positions may be institutionalized whereas other sectors and other sub-positions may not.

Role conflict is viewed usually as a situation in which an individual recognizes and accepts the legitimacy of two sets of incompatible obligations tied to separate roles (e.g., occupational and husband role).[5] The superintendent faced a number of situations of this type. But in addition to such inter-role conflicts, he faces a number of intra-role

conflict situations. We present here an example of two clear cut types. Type 1: School board members A,B,C expect him to serve as educational leader; members D,E,F expect him to serve only as the administrator of school board policies. Here are two sets of contradictory expectations from multiple alters in the same position and the superintendent accepts the legitimacy of both sets of contradictory expectations. Type 2: The teachers (his subordinates) expect him as superintendent to maximize the teachers' salary budget item. The school board (his superiors) expect him to minimize it. In this example, the incumbents of different counter positions have contradictory expectations for the incumbent of the same role. We are further finding that the degree of anxiety and guilt feelings and the severity of sanctions are variables that are in large part neglected in existing role conflict models. Certain expectations may be widely held by alters in the same counter role but these expectations are not in general accepted by egos as obligations. Such expectations constitute "pressures" (from the point of view of ego) not legitimized role expectations. We have also found it necessary to introduce the term role collision to handle potential role conflict situations which do not result in anxiety feelings for the role incumbent. It may be necessary to treat the cited examples of "intra-role" conflict as instances of "sub-role" or "role segment" conflict.

We also are finding that "roles" may be differentiated on the extent to which they require other "roles" as prerequisites for in role recruitment and on the basis of the degree to which they can be segregated from other roles in social behavior (role segregation).

One final complexity. The usual sociological treatment of the process of "role taking" is based on the socialization model, whether "the role" be an age, a sex, a family or an occupational role. Such a formulation assumes that there is a set of clearly defined and "jelled" expectations for the "role" recruit. The complications noted earlier regarding "role" expectations make suspect this assumption, at least as it applies to the superintendency position. We are finding that there are other possibilities regarding how expectations are "learned" or taught and who defines them. For example, (1) In some instances we find that the superintendent (ego) defines what most of the expectations regarding his rights and duties should and will be and the school board (alters) accepts his definitions. (2) In other instances, alters do most of the defining and ego accepts alter's definitions. (3) There is also the possibility that ego may define some and alters other behavior segments of the position of role sectors. (4) Neither ego or alters may have well defined expectations and they may be eventually worked out through a process of trial and error or "jockeying" back and forth. (5) Expectations may be <u>partially</u> learned <u>before</u> position incumbency.

In short, the socialization model is apparently only one of several types of role definitions and role learning processes. The assumption that it is the single mechanism available is untenable for the occupational role we are studying.

Implications

It is impossible within our time limitation to spell out fully the implications of these empirical complexities for the development of role conceptualization. We will emphasize only four points.

(1) The common practice of declaring or assuming that a particular status or position has associated with it a set of rights and duties on which there is consensus should be abandoned. For this common practice must be substituted theoretically grounded empirical research designed to answer such questions as: Are certain behavioral segments associated with the position institutionalized and others not? Is there consensus on expectations by most or all incumbents of all counter positions? Are there variant sub-cultural definitions of the same positions? (2) Theoretical schemes may have to give consideration to the sectors or segments of a social position rather than view it as an indivisible unit. The number of alters in the same social position and the number of relevant positions will have to be treated as variables in theoretical formulations encompassing statuses similar to that of the school superintendent. (3) The socialization model is only one of many paradigms needed to explain the role learning and role definition process. The assumption that the process of role learning applicable to the adoption of age and sex positions is applicable to role taking in other social positions must be empirically examined. (4) Theoretical formulations must be developed that can handle the phenomena of role collision vs. role conflict, intra as well as inter role segregation and integration.

The complications of "role behavior" analysis noted in this paper may be a resultant of certain pecularities of the superintendency position. We strongly suspect, however, that many social positions now viewed as roles will prove to have similar complexities when carefully studied.

It is our feeling that the limitation of existent role paradigms are due in large part to the paucity of empirical investigations which have put these conceptual schemes to the crucial test of their research utility. In our judgment, this is a fundamental criterion for evaluating the worth of theoretical formulations.

Footnotes

[1]Cf. Parsons, Talcott and Edward A. Shils, with the assistance of James Olds, "Values, Motives and Systems of Action," in Parsons and Shils (eds.), Toward a General Theory of Action, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951, p. 190; and Theodore M. Newcomb, "Role Concepts in Social Psychology," paper delivered at the 1948 meetings of the American Psychological Association.

[2]Cf. Lionel F. Neiman and James W. Hughes, "The Problem of the Concept of Role--A Re-Survey of the Literature," Social Forces, 30, (December, 1951), pp. 141 - 149.

[3]Norman Cameron, "Role Concepts in Behavior Pathology," American Journal of Sociology," LV, (March, 1950), pp. 464 - 467.

[4]The principal conceptualizations of "role" are to be found in Parsons, Talcott and Edward A. Shils, op. cit.; Parsons, Talcott, The Social System, Clencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1951; Newcomb, Theodore M., op. cit.; Newcomb, Theodore M., Social Psychology, New York: The Dryden Press, 1950; Linton, Ralph, The Study of Man, New York: D. Appleton - Century Company, 1936, esp. Chapter Eight, "Status and Role," pp. 113 - 131; see Neiman and Hughes, op. cit. for other role formulations.

[5]On role conflict see Parsons, Talcott, The Social System, op. cit., esp. pp. 280 - 283; Toby, Jackson, "Some Variables in Role Conflict Analysis," Social Forces, 30, (March, 1952), pp. 323 - 327; MacRae, Duncan, "Role Conflict in Formal Organizations," unpublished memorandum of the Laboratory of Social Relations, Harvard University, Stouffer, Samuel A., "An Analysis of Conflicting Social Norms, American Sociological Review, 14, (1949), pp. 707 - 717; Stouffer, Samuel A., and Jackson Toby, "Role Conflicts and Personality," American Journal of Sociology, 16, (1951), pp. 395 - 406.